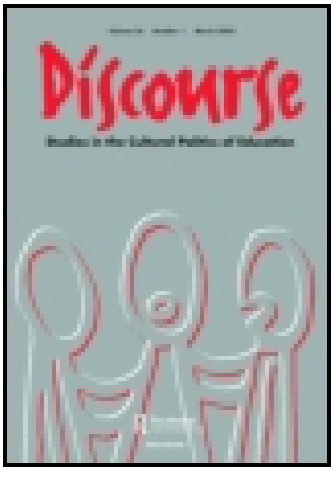

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Governing education without reform: the power of the example

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There is an increasing emphasis today on different forms of evidence-based policy in education. Several authors address the related emergence of new patterns of governing and describe forms of governing by numbers and related practices of governing by comparison. There is, however, less focus on the governmental use of soft evidence such as examples of good practice. Drawing on the analysis of governing practices in Belgium (Flanders) and Europe, this article attempts to examine in detail how soft evidence, among other elements, constitutes the current governing configuration. It is argued that this configuration includes several mechanisms that appear as evident but have far-reaching consequences: imposing spaces of meaning and discussion, deciding on what is within one's control and what is not, making people believe there is no longer something beyond themselves that is an excuse for actual self-improvement. What takes shape as part of techniques of contextualization, personalization, and permanent monitoring is 'the power of the example': learning from examples in view of increased performance. The conclusion expresses some concerns about the tendencies toward a manipulative society.

Keywords: governing; evidence-based policy; power; globalization; Europe; education

1. Introduction

Terms such as 'evidence-based' and 'information-rich environments' became part of policy discourses from the beginning of the twenty-first century onwards. The case of Belgium and, specifically, Flanders (the Dutch speaking part), is no exception. Benchmarks, performance measures, and targets have become essential ingredients of Belgian's policy-making in education. The basic message seems to be that educational reform should be evidence-based or evidence-driven. What is embraced in one way or another is the mode of reasoning that is expressed by Slavin (2008) – one of the key voices and reference figures – who argues that this mode of reform is needed to move behind education's 'prescientific' stage 'as medicine was a hundred years ago,' and who states that for this to happen, we should embrace the adage: 'use what works' (Slavin, 2008, p. 124). Meanwhile, several authors have addressed how the discourses on evidence-based policy correlate with the emergence of new patterns of governing such as 'governing by numbers' (Rose, 1991) and related practices of 'governing by comparison' (Nóvoa & Yariv-Marshal, 2003). In a similar line, this article takes a closer look at practices, strategies, and related discourses on evidence-based policy and information-rich environments. However, the focus is on a very particular issue, namely, the role of soft evidence in governing education.

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When looking at current national as well as European policy-making, what has become increasingly common is the use of kinds of soft, qualitative evidence, such as examples of good practice, narrative accounts, exchange of experiences, both to justify and orient policy measures and objectives. In the literature there is, however, limited focus on the governmental use of this kind of knowledge and how it turns into useful evidence. Drawing on a sketch of governing practices in Belgium (Flanders) and Europe in the second section, the aim of the paper is to clarify more precisely how qualitative knowledge comes to count as evidence and starts to play a strategic role in governing education. The third section focuses on the shift from a governing configuration that puts policy reform central stage to a configuration where governing circles around learning for innovation. The fourth section is an attempt to examine in detail how soft evidence, among other elements, constitutes the current governing configuration, and concludes that what emerges today is the 'power of the example.' This form of power and related knowledge does not correlate with common reform, implementation, and inspection policies but with practices of learning, innovation, and monitoring. The conclusion expresses some concerns about 'the manipulative' in current modes of governing that rely on monitoring and exemplification.

2. What counts as evidence today? The case of Belgium (Flanders)

The chosen entrance to the issue of evidence in education policy is not the theoretical or normative literature (e.g., Bridges, Smeyers, & Smith, 2008; Solesbury, 2002), but some specific examples of actual practices and discourses that refer in a more or less explicit way to 'evidence' as a crucial requirement of governing. A rich and wide-reaching practice is the Open Method of Coordination that is developed and promoted by the European Commission as a form of soft law and soft governance in fields such as education where the commission has limited space for centralized policy-making and legal intervention (see also Lawn, 2006). The method, which explicitly aims at 'contributing to evidence-based policy-making,' includes the formulation of 'European benchmarks,' 'reference levels of average European performance,' 'peer learning and the exchange of good practice,' and 'periodic monitoring and reporting' (EC, 2009). In arguing for benchmarks to be part of the *Education and Training 2020* framework (the following-up of the *ET 2010 work program*), the Council stresses:

> They [the benchmarks] should be based solely on comparable data and take account of the differing situations in individual Member States. They should not be considered as concrete targets for individual countries to reach by 2020. Rather, Member States are invited to consider, on the basis of national priorities and whilst taking account of changing economic circumstances, how and to what extent they can contribute to the collective achievement of the European benchmarks through national actions. (EC, 2009, p. 7)

The governing issue is clearly framed in rather soft terms such as invitation, learning from each other, exchange of good practices, and what is emphasized is that so-called 'hard evidence' should be complemented with contextualized information and with a consideration of particular circumstances. The policy declaration of the former minister of education (2004–2009) of the Flemish community (Belgium) already announced this framing:

> The European targets are not threatening the particularity of the Flemish education system. (…) Other countries can learn from us, but we can also learn from other EU member states.

> This is the key point of the open method of coordination: the targets and indicators are decided together, but the member states themselves determine the trajectory to reach the targets, and this in accordance with their historic, educational and political context … This method – also called 'soft law' – hence should not threaten national education policy of the member states.[1] (Vandenbroucke, 2004, pp. 24–25)

The mode of reasoning that is expressed here questions the assumption that central government and centralized policy are to be considered as the source and driving force of reform in education. The concern in this case is not only to have the member state's autonomy respected – that is just one level to read the quotation – but to consider the responsibility of each member state. Those being governed – the European member states – are expected to be engaged in reform, or more specifically, they are the ones expected to learn in view of successful innovation. What is suggested is a well-targeted project of innovation for which the responsible member state's 'historical, educational and political context' appears as something that can and should be taken into account.

A similar way of thinking becomes visible in how member states, and Belgium again is used as a case, consider their policy tasks and the entities to be governed. A main policy objective consists in governing schools through providing evidence and more precisely by the creation of an 'information-rich environment' for evidence-based policy at school level to emerge (Vandenbroucke, 2004). The collection and provision of knowledge through, for instance, school audit reports, assessment tests, school performance feedback systems, or self-evaluation tools are suggested to be an effective policy strategy to steer the field of education. The strategy is combined with the specific policy on increased school autonomy combined with responsibility, and more exactly, with accountability (2004, p. 43). In view of these changes, the minister of education explicitly argues to move beyond the 'strong input related steering' through 'financing and extensive regulation' on the one hand, and 'quality control by the inspectorate' through 'process and output elements' on the other hand (p. 49). The new objective – 'toward another model of steering' – is formulated as follows:

> We want to explore whether steering should not be more carried out through output indicators. … The aim is not to judge schools in a one dimensional way on their results. These depend on a lot of factors, and they are not always within the range of the school itself. Results of schools thus always have to be considered in a relative way, in relation to the possibilities they have and the context within which they have to work. (p. 49)

Similar to the European discourses and policy options, the new mode of governmental reasoning frames educational quality in terms of output or performance levels, stresses the responsibility of the entities to be governed, and argues for contextualized learning and innovation strategies.

It is not difficult to see these modes of reasoning as part of what is called *New Public Management*, and the ambition, although with important differences between countries, to gradually replace the bureaucratically organized public sector with responsive, entrepreneurial agencies and output management (Desrosières, 2002; Olssen, Codd, & O'Neil, 2004; Ranson, 2003). In these discourses and practices, it is also not difficult to see the emergence of new modes of governing education that increasingly rely on data collection, numbers, or performance indicators and that are part of what is called 'governing by numbers,' 'policy as numbers,' and 'steering by evaluation' (e.g., Lawn & Lingard, 2002; Lindblad & Popkewitz, 2000; Lingard, Martino, & Rezai-Rashti, 2013; Ozga, 2009; Simons, 2007). The aim is not to further engage theoretically with these conceptual tools

but to draw attention to some features of what will be called the current governing configuration.

3. The governing configuration: what counts as evidence for whom?

The term *governing* configuration is used to refer to a more or a less stable and strategic assemblage of practices, discourses, and relationships that creates an arrangement to govern people, education, and society as a whole. Instead of focusing on the actual regime of governing or investigating specific intentions and causes, the main objective is an explorative description of the central figures of research, policy, education, professionalism, and with specific attention on the (re)configuration of governing relations (see also Lawn & Grek, 2009). The sketch of the current governing configuration will be drawn in three steps: first, a further description of the kind of knowledge that counts as evidence today; second, an exploration of the modification in the shape of and relationship between the figure of educational practice, policy-making, educational research, and promoted professionalism; and third, an outline of the central problematic that takes shape in today's mode of governing.

First, there seems to be a new consensus on what counts as evidence when the provision and distribution of evidence become itself a mode of governing. The discourses mentioned earlier clarify that knowledge in some way has to indicate what works in order to be regarded as useful. In that regard, several specific indicators are used such as the highest performance, meeting the targets, or proven effectiveness (Davies, Nutley, & Smith, 2000; Luke, 2003). The focus is, however, not only on hard evidence or numerical data but also on different sorts of soft evidence and qualitative data. What actually counts and circulates as evidence today are the examples of good practice or the examples of best performance. Based on the PISA[2] results, the Finnish educational system, for instance, has been put forward as an example of good practice that is expected to allow for processes of policy learning (Grek, 2009). Also in line with the European benchmarked performances of member states in *Education and Training 2010* and *2020* (EC, 2009), examples of good practice are selected and have become points of orientation for policy making in less-performing member states (Simons, 2007). In a similar way, the use of examples of good practice has become familiar at school and at teacher level. Government in Belgium, for instance, supports 'testing grounds' where schools are offered the resources and autonomy to develop projects and test initiatives regarding themes (implementation of information and communication technology, for instance) agreed upon at the central level (Vandenbroucke, 2004). The main objective is to look for concrete initiatives and projects that have proved to be working and that can become examples for other schools. These practices clarify that governing through evidence is not only about governing by *numbers* but also includes a mode of governing by *examples*. To a large extent, the examples of good practice are examples of good performance and are being decided upon available numerical performance data. In that sense, governing by examples is to be regarded as complementary to governing by numbers.

Second, with the focus on governing through 'what works,' a particular conception of and relationship between policy, research, professionalism, and education takes shape. A contrast with the governing configuration within the so-called welfare or social state will help highlight some elements of the current configuration. Highly schematically, and not taking into account differences between countries, an alliance between a particular kind

of power, a particular kind of knowledge, and a particular framing of and acting upon education takes shape within the welfare configuration in the second part of the twentieth century (Rose, 1999). Governing is increasingly understood as carefully designed social planning through public policy and as part of that project, scientists and scholars are expected to support the general engineering plans for social and economic change (see also Popkewitz, 2007). Social scientists on their part aim at giving their research relevance against the background of welfare policies and centralized reform (Wagner et al., 1991). Within the welfare configuration, the field of education figured as in need of central reform in view of particular ideals that are politically advocated. What came to count as evidence is knowledge on 'what is the case' (for instance, on the current state of affairs in education and optimal decision-making) in view of carrying out politically agreed ideas on 'what should be the case' (for instance, on equal opportunities). In this configuration, political and intellectual reform agendas are clearly connected in an atmosphere of social planning (cf. John, 1998, pp. 4–5). But not only reform policies are suggested to bridge the gap between research driven ideals and current practices. Important to mention is how also training professionals attempts to bridge a similar gap. Educational research does not only enter the policy arena but also the system of training professionals, that is, the training of teachers or educational specialists. The field of educational practice is for that reason not only approached as a field of implementation but also as a field of application: the optimization of the field of practice through, for instance, increased teacher's professionalism. Stated very generally, what counts as evidence in the welfare configuration is either knowledge with professional relevance that is mobilized in teacher training or knowledge with policy relevance as part of central reform and planning.

Governing through 'what works,' as the case of Europe and Belgium clearly indicates, installs a rather different configuration. In contrast to centrally initiated and organized reform policies that are typical for a social welfare agenda, there is a clear focus on local reform or innovation initiated by local actors. The field of practice, including member states, schools, teacher, is framed as a field of learning in view of optimal performance, and hence, in need of specific evidence: knowledge on what works (better). As a consequence, the critical issue is no longer successful implementation or application, but optimal learning: learning from what works in view of self-improvement or innovation. Without going into detail, the criterion 'what works' increasingly orients educational research, and this is not only due to externally imposed criteria on or expectations formulated toward the education research fabric. The broad concern with 'what works' is theoretically and methodologically translated into 'learning gains' or 'school and teacher effectiveness' and has become part of a vocabulary that policy-makers and educational researchers increasingly share (Hammersley, 2002; Ozga, 2000). When learning bridges the gap between knowledge on what works and the field of practice, government has an interest in that knowledge being produced, on the one hand, and in local actors to be responsibilised for it being used, on the other hand. In a similar way, the concern with what works enters the field of training professionals and, more precisely, all types of professionalization initiatives that are now being approached as ongoing learning processes. Probably, the popular term *competencies* and related approaches of competency-based learning actually refer to exactly this view on productive learning. In Belgium/Flanders, for instance, the detailed list with 'basic competencies for beginning teacher' is derived from the knowledge, skills, and attitudes a senior teacher has at her disposal when

working or performing properly, and as a result, these competencies are expected to orient the teaching profession and the teacher training institutions to 'what proves to work' (Simons & Kelchtermans, 2008). In short, the field of educational practice figures no longer in the first place as a field of implementation or application but as a field of learning in need of responsibilization. What counts as evidence in this emerging configuration is knowledge or competencies that allow for innovation or increased performance through modes of productive learning. This is foremost knowledge and competencies with innovation or professionalization relevance.

Third, a configuration of governing that formulates its ambition in terms of permanent innovation and not in terms of central reform and that considers productive learning and not reform implementation or knowledge application to be the main tool for improvement puts forward a particular problematic of governing. The problematic is not in the first instance discussed in terms of planning or training but in terms of responsibilization: to make states, schools, and teachers actually responsible for productive learning in view of innovation and to make them use the evidence in that regard. The OECD/CERI (2008) articulates this problematic in terms of a challenge to 'generalize innovation' when classic reform initiatives are no longer adequate to achieve desirable change. Within the current governing configuration, two complementary strategies can thus be distinguished in order to reach the generalized innovation: governing through what works and governing through responsibilization. Both elements will be explored in more detail in the next sections.

4. Opening up the black box

Governing through what works assumes that in one way or another, evidence should speak for itself (for actors, such as member states or schools) and governing through responsibilization implies actors come to see themselves as the locus of responsibility for innovation. Specific practices, constructions, and mechanisms are rendered invisible or pushed to the background when these assumptions are taken for granted, although the operations are essential to make the two strategies actually work. This section, therefore, tries to open up the proverbial black box – to use the expression of Latour (1987) – of the governing configuration with its double strategy of governing through what works and governing through responsibilization: those operations and mechanisms that *make* the evidence speak for itself and that *constitute* actors for whom the evidence actually is considered as a so-called incentive for self-improvement.

4.1. Governing through what works

Part of the idea and ideal of social planning and educational reform was the clear distinction between the world of facts and the world of values, that is, between the real and the normative, the descriptive and the prescriptive, or between the world of evidence and the world of politics, policy or ideology. Reform policies often embrace a particular future oriented and normative conception of society in all its parts (e.g., social equality, social justice) and seek to bring the current state of affairs in line with that ideal or norm. The very gap between the current state that is revealed in research findings and the desirable state being prescribed in ideology or politics justifies interventionist reform policies and other prescriptions in, for instance, teacher training. However, the distinction between the real and the normative, and the related gap that planning and reform policy

can and has to bridge, seems to be no longer ordering the current governing configuration.

Within the new configuration, governing starts from the real or the current state of affairs, for instance, the current opportunities for member states and schools to learn for self-improvement or the innovation possibilities in a given situation. Instead of a political or an ideological imposition of norms on reality that created the image of progress through policy reform, what is taken into account now are the norms *embedded in* the current state of affairs. This 'realistic turn' in governing has clearly similarities with the early liberal mode of governing: early liberal governing, it was claimed, should be a rational way of governing, and, hence, should justify its actions based on 'the nature' of what is to be governed. As Foucault (2004) elaborated in detail, early liberalism broke with governing according to the reason of state for, in its ambition to govern reality, it did no longer want to impose a kind of external normativity on the entities to be governed. In a similar way, current modes of governing break with a reason of social planning and seek to govern by taking the given state of affairs as a point of departure. There is, however, a very important difference with early liberalism. While the latter embraces a kind of naturalist mode of reasoning, current discourses very clearly articulate a kind of constructivist reasoning (Berns, 2009; see also Lindblad & Popkewitz, 2004). In a naturalist perspective, the market, for instance, is considered as a natural condition or state of affairs, possibly perverted by nonrational, artificial, and nonliberal governmental action and in need of a rational, laissez-faire approach. The current, constructivist understanding looks at the organization of society, including the market, as what has been constructed, what functions better or worse, and thus what needs enabling policies (e.g., school choice) to keep on functioning. In line with this constructivist mode of reasoning, taking into account the current state of affairs in governing implies at once the idea that this state of affairs is constructed in view of certain objectives and is open to endless reconstruction.

The constructivist mode of governmental thought helps to understand why what works becomes a main criterion to judge what knowledge counts as evidence. As Lyotard (1984) discussed in detail some time ago, the focus on what works actually implies that a 'technological criterion' is used in the legitimization of knowledge. Knowledge becomes evidence as far as it offers an indication of the quality of constructions and operations. The term 'quality' can receive different meanings within this technical frame: actually meeting the objectives, aims, or targets (effectiveness), meeting the objectives, aims, or targets with less means (cost or time efficiency) or doing more with less, that is, performativity and what Lyotard defines as 'the best possible input-output equation' (p. 46). It is important to stress that the criteria for judgment are not imposed but considered to be part of or derived from the technology or the system itself. According to this logic, there is little difference between knowledge about cars or computers through listing certain performance indicators and knowledge about educational systems or schools through EU-indicators such as 'number of early school leavers' or 'participation in lifelong learning' (EC, 2009).

When the technological criteria of performativity or the focus on performance indicators of a tool or a system become the point of departure, improvement is about the reconstruction of the constructed system or the construction of a new system that performs better. Initiatives of change according to this logic are oriented toward an 'immanent norm,' that is, a norm internal to the constructed system (Berns, 2009).

Knowledge on how something works or performs has for this reason the form of a particular kind of evaluative statement. The knowledge is claimed to be an objective, impartial, and neutral statement about the performance of a system – '10% participants in lifelong learning' – yet at the same time, holding an evaluation of the current state in line with a normativity that is inherent to that system. Instead of observing, quantifying, or describing a natural order of things and confronting it governmentally with specific values or norms as part of a collectively decided and projected future, current modes of governing assume that each state of affairs is a constructed state of affairs and, hence, open to reconstruction in view of efficiency, effectiveness, and performativity (see also Bröckling, Krasmann, & Lemke, 2000). This mode of governing, as Berns (2009, p. 7, italics in original) formulates very clearly, is 'governing *departing from reality*, departing from existing activities, and no longer governing *the real* or the concrete with the idea that the concrete and its government would be objects of decision.' If governing through what has proven to work indeed is to be understood as a mode of governing that departs from existing activities, this allows for understanding of why the possible, learning, comparison, examples, and monitoring appear as crucially important today.

First, with the retreatment of governing the real and the related practices of social planning or reform policy, the space of reconstruction or improvement is ordered according to the logic of the actual and the potential, or the actual and the virtual (see also Deleuze, 1990). For instance, a knowledge claim on the actual performance of the Flemish educational system with regard to the percentage of early school leavers is at once a statement about a potential future that opens up a space for action toward increased performance, that is, a decrease in the percentage of dropouts. Departing from reality in fact comes down to 'governing the possible' (Berns, 2009, p. 90). The focus of governing is on 'what is possible', that is, on the future that is virtually present in actual, existing activities or performances.

Second, and as indicated earlier, while policy and planning in the welfare configuration were suggested to bridge the gap between the real and the normative or the ideal, the activity of learning is what bridges the gap between what is actual and what is possible. In other words, learning seems to become the name for the capacity or force that is able to reactualize the system in an improved or an innovated way. And just as schools and teachers can and are expected to engage in productive learning, also European member states and regions can and have to learn in view of innovation (see also Simons & Masschelein, 2008). Similar to the concept of policy in the welfare state, learning becomes a kind of mythical force, a projection of all dreams of change and improvement: the natural force behind all constructions, the unmoved mover.

Third, what the learning process needs is an indication of the available potential for increased performance. Within the governing configuration that departs from reality, this indication is not a natural given, nor is it something that is or can be imposed as an external norm or standard. In line with the focus on the internal criterion of what works, specific norms have to be decided, or more specifically, they have to be deliberately set or fabricated. At this point, the logic of comparison is inherent to learning for innovation. Roughly speaking, comparison can take two forms. First, the comparison of one's actual performance – for instance, as a member state or as a school – with one's past performance(s) opens up a space to make change and difference intelligible, to value the actual performance, and to set targets for future performance. Whether there is in fact room for learning can only turn out after change initiatives in this scenario. In the second

scenario, the performances of different educational systems, schools, or teachers are compared at a given moment and measured as differences or the difference with an average that can immediately be approached as an indication for potential learning. In both scenarios, as Nóvoa and Yariv-Marshal (2003) already clarified elsewhere, comparison is not just a kind of knowledge technique adapted to existing realities. Comparison is an ordering mechanism that opens up spaces for meaning and for action and as a consequence, comparison constitutes realities and possibilities to change those realities. Also, in both scenarios, the set norm, standard, or performance level is a matter of decision and, more specifically, a deliberate fabrication or projection departing from existing activities. This is clearly illustrated not only with the list of European benchmarks but also with the benchmarked added value of, for instance, a school (OECD, 2008). The practice of benchmarking, that is, the decision on performance targets decided upon the actual, average performance level, or upon top performances, articulates clearly how desirable futures are created in line with the space of immanent normativity. In Belgium (Flemish community), the formulation of a list with 'professional competencies for teachers' and 'basic competencies for beginning teachers' illustrates the fabrication process of projecting specific targets for future performance that is at once opening spaces for governing the possible (Ceulemans, Simons, & Struyf, 2012). These lists with competencies depart from reality, project a future for teachers and teacher education, and in that movement, create opportunities for governing the present. Governing by departing from reality in fact comes down to governing the possible by fabricating or, more correctly, carefully designing and modeling futures. Worth stressing at this point is that not only the future but also the past is being designed and, therefore, is turned into something that becomes available within the present. The current concern with heritage could be regarded as the careful fabrication of the past, and this is analogous to popular techniques of future scenarios that make the future available in the present. The past and future are no longer the horizons or the objectives of governing, but instead, they become reframed as available resources for governing the 'eternal present' (Beck, 1992) and, more accurately, for governing the eternal possible in the present.

The strategy of designing futures, and this is the fourth issue, clarifies how and why examples can play such an important role in governing. The fabrication of examples – that is, the selection, design, and presentation of an optimal school performance or a well-performing European member state – fits perfectly with a mode of governmental reasoning that departs from existing activities and performances. The example is always already part of the reality all others belong to as well; the example is not an ideal and is not an imagination departing from an external norm. An example resides within the space of immanent normativity, always holds a message on what is possible and, therefore, bears the mark of what works. But at the same time, the example is what exceeds or excels within that space of normativity, and, hence, functions as a kind of *primus inter pares*. The example – for instance, 'Finland' within PISA 2003 – is a fabricated future or possibility, and works first of all at the level of the possible. Very telling in that regard was the title of the policy declaration of the Minister of Education in Belgium): 'Today champion in mathematics, and tomorrow also in equal opportunities' (Vandenbroucke, 2004). Finland proved that it is possible to exceed for both performance indicators and, hence, became a fabricated future for policy-makers. All sorts of examples, as a consequence, can start to play a strategic role in a mode of governing that relies on

learning for innovation and self-improvement: the carefully selected and designed example gives both direction and content to the learning. Learning from or by examples, therefore, can appear as a kind of civic virtue in today's governing configuration.

Fifth and finally, a particular form of control and observation becomes part of a governing configuration that is focused on governing the possible. The concern with performance and the focus on immanent norms are not in the first place a matter of inspection that is oriented toward stable and fixed standards or norms and not a matter of regular evaluation or testing that relies on general criteria or natural entities. Similar to how examples evoke learning, performance necessitates monitoring and permanent feedback loops. The required production and circulation of information was in fact already very precisely articulated by Wiener (1950/1989, p. 24, 30), the founder of cybernetics, when he argued that feedback is about 'the property of being able to adjust future conduct by past performance' and that it requires agencies that 'perform the function of tell tales or monitors – that is, of instruments that indicate a performance.' The suggested monitors or tell tales come very close to what actually emerges in Europe today. The 'Education and Training Monitor', follow-up of the EU progress reports but now drawing on a *Joint Assessment Framework*, is published yearly to monitor progress toward the *Education and Training 2020* objectives and benchmarks (European Commission, 2012). The monitoring allows member states to become real at a common reference stage and, in the same move, allows these states to know what is possible in relation to common indicators and feedback. What takes shape as the correlate of permanent monitoring is a 'data-based self'; it is through multiple indicators and flows of data that not only member states but also schools and teachers can come to think of themselves (Simon, 2005; see also Deleuze, 1990). Since monitoring not only allows knowing who or what one *is* as a member state, school, and teacher, but at the same what one *can* be, it functions as a kind of navigation tool (Simons, 2007). More precisely, monitors function as global positioning tools since they position one's performance in relation to others and, as indicated earlier, orient the learning process. The focus is always the *present* performance and *present* possibilities, and as a consequence, the ideal situation – when following this logic – becomes *permanent* monitoring in view of *permanent* positioning and *permanent* learning.

In summary, governing through what works does not create spaces of centralized reform in view of governing the future and breaking with the past. Governing through what works instead creates spaces of learning, exemplification, and permanent monitoring as part of governing the possible through designing futures. As far as governing actually implies to start from and support the self-governing and learning of those who are governed, this mode of governing is in fact a kind of 'governing without governing' (Berns, 2009; Olssen, 1996, p. 340). In other words, and perhaps more specifically, it is a mode of governing without reform. Governing through what works dreams of a society in which the possible is kept alive by designing futures that works.

4.2. Governing through responsibilization

Governing without reform expects that reality speaks for itself through performance measurements and examples of good practice. Perhaps, today, this is increasingly the case, but then it is important to ask what makes reality speak for itself, or more specifically, to explore for whom does this specific reality speak or who listens to the

voice of performance measures and examples of good performance. For that it is important to study in further detail the mechanisms enacted in the strategy of responsibilization. The mechanisms of the strategy construct actors who listen to what works, that is, they make actors believe that they are responsible and actually control their current and possible increased performance. Responsibilization implies that these actors, such as member states, but also these schools and teachers come to understand there is no reference anymore to something outside themselves and beyond their control that explains their performance. The strategy will be explored by focusing on four mechanisms: the establishment of spaces of equivalence, the use of techniques of contextualization and personalization, the distribution of responsibility and control, and the emergence of a particular way of exercising power.

First, governing through what works implies the constitution of a particular 'space of equivalence' (Desrosières, 2002) through specific techniques of 'inscription' (Latour, 1987). Numbers and performance indicators but also narratives on examples of good practice are not just representing an already existing reality but function as inscriptions that allow something – an educational system, a school, and a teacher – to become real. To become real means that something is turned into a particular entity that starts to make sense and that can be acted upon in several ways. Something like 'the (national) economy,' as Rose (1999) shows in detail, does not exist without very particular inscriptions such as the calculation and visualization of the gross national product. In a similar way, performance indicators on learning outcomes or early school leavers call an educational system or school into being and make them real. But these inscriptions – numbers or narratives – at once constitute a particular space where entities can be compared or a space where examples can be exchanged. Through the inscriptions of numbers and narratives, entities such as educational systems and schools are made equivalent: they are all very different, and they name and claim their identity through difference, but at the same time, they are similar since they are all engaged in performing actions. Crucial with regard to the constitution of spaces of equivalence in the current governing configuration is the assumption that everything and everyone can be measured on the single scale of performance in view of what works. This assumption is, of course, every time reaffirmed when reclaiming one's identity and difference based on performance indicators or examples (Decuypere, Simons, & Masschelein, 2011). As clarified in the previous section, these inscriptions show that the current spaces of equivalence are at once spaces of comparison or spaces of exemplification; the comparison with others or the confrontation with examples gives sense or meaning to how one performs and how one could perform. International assessment studies, like PISA, for instance, constitute a particular, global space of equivalence where national education systems can come to learn to know themselves in comparison to others (see also Grek, 2009; Popkewitz, 2011; Simons, 2007). The produced self-knowledge of countries reveals at once an indication of what is possible and opens up a space for learning in view of self-improvement. In a similar way, exemplification operates as a source of self-knowledge: the set or selected example of good, better, or even worse performance is a reminder of the possible in what is actual and at once a target or benchmark for future performance. In summary, a main feature of the constituted space of equivalence today is that it is at the same time a space of innovation. Or – formulated in a rather different idiom – when one comes to know oneself as a member state, a school, or

a teacher in the current governing configuration one is immediately confronted with the possible and trapped within the logic of innovation.

The strategy of responsibilization, and this is the second mechanism, involves what can be called 'techniques of contextualization and personalization.' These techniques are not to be regarded as the expression of a critical reaction toward modes of governing that are perceived as being too general, formal, or abstract. The hard techniques of soft knowledge are constitutive components of governing through types of abstract evidence and numerical knowledge. Take again the minister of education who claimed that European targets should be used in accordance with the 'historical, educational and political context' (Vandenbroucke, 2004, p. 24), and who stressed that 'results of schools always have to be considered in a relative way, in relation to the possibilities they have and the context within which they have to work' (2004, p. 49). Contextual issues – such as the country's or school's institutional or demographic context – are treated in this mode of reasoning as important, however, within the constituted space of equivalence, and thus in view of explaining differences in performance. Contextualization is for that reason not only about a possible better understanding or explanation of differences. Since the space of equivalence is at once a space of possible innovation, taking into account the context is a technique to get a grip on the possible and to answer the question what is possible and what not given the circumstances. Put another way, the contextualization of numbers, performance indicators, or examples is a technique to make the possible concrete. The focus on contextual issues and the related debates on performance indicators – 'is that increase in learning outcomes possible for us?' – and examples – 'what could we learn from Finland?' – signals that the current space of equivalence and innovation is established, actually reinforces the inscriptions and authorizes the established way of speaking and action on education.

The technique of contextualization is closely related to what can be called a technique of personalization.[3] Take again the example of international assessment studies. Andreas Schleicher (2013), of the OECD, promotes the new customized PISA test as follows:

> PISA has created huge amounts of big data about the quality of schooling outcomes. PISA has also helped to change the balance of power in education by making public policy in the field of education more transparent and more efficient. At the micro-level, there were still a lot of skeptics: teachers thought this was just another accountability tool through which governments wanted to control them. So what did we do? This year we put in place a kind of 'MyPISA' – PISA-type instruments that we circulated out into the field. Now every school can figure out how it compares with other schools anywhere else in the world, schools that are similar to them or schools that are very different. (2013, para. 5)

The PISA tests for schools are not only a way to measure performances at a lower level of aggregation and not just a strategy to directly target schools instead of the indirect orientation toward national educational systems and their governments. The personal PISA test could also be regarded as a way to contextualize data *during* their production and, as a result, to make the produced knowledge immediately useful. At stake is the customization of the evidence provision:

> It is expected that the PISA-Based Test for Schools will provide important peer-to-peer learning opportunities for local educators – locally, nationally and internationally – as well as the opportunity to share good practices to help identify 'what works' to improve learning and build better skills for better lives. (OECD, n.d.)

The basic logic is that there is no evidence that fits and motivates all, and instead of relying on techniques of contextualization, the production and provision of evidence itself is customized, or more precisely, the evidence is personalized. Put differently, personalization works as a kind of proactive contextualization and makes what is possible concrete by personalized design.

Techniques of contextualization and personalization also enable pointing at another, rather important, component of the promoted self-knowledge and self-government of, for instance, countries, schools, or teachers. In the current space of equivalence and comparison, the prevailing advices are no longer 'look back,' 'remember your history,' 'cherish the tradition,' or 'break with your past in view an enlightened future,' but more like 'look around,' 'compare yourself,' 'learn from others,' 'remember what is possible given the circumstances.' Elsewhere, this shift was termed as the replacement of the logic of historical orientation by the logic of global positioning, the narrative of modernization by the narrative of globalization, historical consciousness by ecological consciousness, and to be added now, the governing through reform, social planning, and engineering by governing through innovation, learning and design (see also Simons & Masschelein, 2009). The promotion talk of Schleicher (2013) articulates the issue at stake very accurately: 'Now every school can figure out how it compares with other schools anywhere else in the world.' National, cultural, political, and territorial borders are suspended, or more concisely, they can start to function as contextual issues to find out what is possible or not given the differences. The following thesis can be formulated here: *context* is to our globalized condition what *tradition* was to the modernized condition. Tradition refers to those remainders from the past that still play a role in the present and that raise the problematic of how to govern the future. Context has come to refer to those environmental factors that influence actual performances and that raise the problematic of how to govern the possible. Both tradition and context are something that has to be identified and taken into account in order to see opportunities for, respectively, further modernization and further innovation.

The third mechanism relates to the distribution of the locus of control and the imposition of responsibility. Because the space of equivalence functions at the same time as a space of innovation, the unit of analysis and the level of aggregation of performance data – country, school, and teacher level – are not neutral. They impose at once a locus of control and responsibility for innovation. Take the example of added value measurements (OECD, 2008; see also Decuypere et al., 2011). What is measured is what a particular school adds to the production of learning outcomes and, hence, controlling for all other variables – or, in line with the vocabulary used earlier, for all contextual issues – that might influence the outcomes. What is calculated, or rather estimated, is what the school contributes to student's learning controlled, for instance, for students' background and the school location. More generally, this is the logic of a (quasi-)experimental setup that tries to find out the effects of independent variables at school level (internal locus of control) on the dependent variable (performance, outcomes …) by carefully controlling for variables outside the school's control (external locus of control). As a result, the added value is not just a statement about the performance of the school but at once an indication of what is possible for the school in view of increased added value. Similar to *MyPISA*, added value modeling in fact replaces techniques of contextualization by correcting in the measurement itself for variables outside one's control and, hence, offering evidence that fits the specific school. Confronted with this somehow highly personalized evidence on,

for instance, the potential for added value, it becomes in fact impossible for a school or a teacher to locate a responsibility outside itself. But there are also other consequences.

The first consequence is that the focus is mainly on what has an effect on the dependent variable (that is, the performance level) and, therefore, on the identification and modification of the independent variables in view of increased performance. The OECD (2008, p. 108) argues in that respect: 'The intent is to try to isolate the relative contribution of the school itself (its personnel, policies and resources) to student learning.' The practical consequence is that all variables – such as student background or school location – that cannot be attributed to an internal locus of control and located within one's field of responsibility disappear from the scene of governing. All this is treated as given or as context, beyond the school's control and beyond its responsibility and therefore outside the scope of governing the possible and its field of innovation. For the second consequence, it is important to stress that the distribution of loci of control and the imposition of responsibility lead also to new classifications and labels: high-performing educational system, (in)effective school, excellent teacher, and all-round student (see also Lindblad & Popkewitz, 2000). What happens is, as Hacking (1995) discusses for other contexts, the 'making up' of education systems, schools, students, and teachers. These classifications and labels become part of their self-understanding: they call a self and an understanding into being, but also a field of possible innovative action. Hence, equally important is that this making up includes at once a 'looping effect': the postulation of capacities that can explain differences in performances or excellence as described by the labels and the classifications, and that are for that reason assumed to exist in order to be able to take up the imposed responsibility. It is not surprising that as far as governing focuses on the possible, it correlates with an explosion of terms that suggest a certain capacity for change and for learning and with a growing market for capacity building and learning support. Notions, such as 'professional development capacity,' 'school innovation capacity,' and 'learning capacity' are nice examples of how a responsibility is imposed in dealing with how one is named, labeled, or classified. In sum, the decided unit of analysis and level of aggregation includes an imposition of a locus of control – 'where is innovation possible?' – and the related attribution of responsibility – 'who is responsible for what?' It is a mechanism that arranges what is the object of (self-)governing and what is not, and at the same time who is the subject of (self-)governing with what capacity to take up the responsibility.

Fourth, and finally, we want to explore the kind of power mechanism that takes shape in a configuration of governing through what works and through responsibilization. For this, a Foucaultian view is adopted, but from the outset, it should be clear that it no longer is (only) disciplinary power or the panoptic diagram – even in an enlarged or perfected shape – that captures mechanism of power in today's modes of governing. It is helpful to recall at this point the welfare configuration that relies on the planning and the reform of education through policy, on the one hand, and on increased professionalism through training, on the other hand. In a Foucaultian terminology, and schematically formulated, the former is rooted in the exercise of power through *regulation*, while the latter encloses *disciplinary power* (see Foucault, 1977/1989, 2004). The objective is the regulation and possible reform of the present system of education in view of a particular future in combination with disciplining the self of future teachers according to certain norms. Knowledge needs to be translated, for instance, into reform programs or training

programs and put into action as part of governing the future by regulative or disciplinary projects that fabricate the present (see also Popkewitz, 2007).

The paradigmatic articulation of disciplinary power – 'the diagram of a mechanism of power reduced to its ideal form' – is for Foucault (1977/1989, p. 205) the panopticon, designed by Jeremy Bentham in 1791 as a specific architectonic model of an inspection house. It works according to a logic where the few in the middle of the circle continuously observe the many, without the many necessarily having to know whether there is actually someone observing. The ambition, Foucault (1977/1989, p. 201) argues, is to arrange so that 'surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action.' The power of surveillance can be noticed not only in the organization of the modern school but also in classic practices of school inspection. In the example of the inspectorate, the few (school inspectors) observe and control the many (schools or teachers), often without the latter knowing when to expect the visit of the inspection. The surveillance is not permanent, yet part of this form of power is to give the impression that inspection can take place at every moment. The inspection, furthermore, works through the professional judgment of examined cases in view of a fixed set of norms or standards (see also Lawn & Grek, 2009). Discontinuous inspections, external norms, and invisible surveillance are clearly no longer the basic components of power operations in today's governing configuration that places performance evidence and responsibilization central stage. The focus is rather on permanent control and monitoring, immanent norms (translated into targets and benchmarks) and visible exemplification. It is impossible to discuss all this in great detail, but the following hypothesis can be put forward: governing the future by *regulating* the present and *disciplining* the possible is gradually turning toward governing the possible by *monitoring* the present and *designing* the future. As a first step in the further elaboration of this working hypothesis, the focus is limited to two issues: the importance of 'the power of the example' and the growing importance of monitoring instead of surveillance.[4]

Disciplinary power is quite different from the synopticon or the power mechanisms of the spectacle (Foucault, 1977/1989). In the spectacle of public punishment, as well as in the theater, for instance, the many observe the few, and this observation is meant as to control the masses (Mathiessen 1997, p. 219). This is a rather old modality of power; it is, however, very visible today. An obvious case is the teacher who seeks to govern students through setting an example – a gratification or a punishment of someone in front of the whole classroom. But also PISA-reports, European benchmarks, and testing grounds offer images of performance or best practice and organize a kind of mass spectacle (Vinson & Ross, 2001). A basic synoptic mechanism is the steering in the absence of direct control: the masses are expected to learn from the examples of what works. Setting examples comes actually down to the design of potential futures, that is, the examples of performance highlight learning opportunities. In a similar way, the modeling of futures – as part of making scenarios – works as a way to reveal what is possible in the present. Also the power of rankings of countries and schools operate through the same mechanism of invoking possible learning by projecting new futures. The power of examples, hence, is about the creation of opportunities for productive learning and innovation in view of increased performance. This is no longer the power of invisible surveillance, but the power of the visible examples. And different from the random discontinuity of panoptic surveillance, synoptism includes an ideal of regularity that allows for purposeful

preparation, for contextualization and personalization in order to know and control one's learning opportunities and for responsible innovation.

Today's concern with designing the future through setting examples, numerous forms of rankings and focus on scenarios correlates, as indicated earlier, with attempts to monitor the present. Paradigmatic in this regard is the *Europe 2020 Monitoring Platform* (2013) and the *Education and Training Monitor* (2013), including an online visual tool that 'enables users to compare, for example, particular sub-groups, countries and their performance at a given point in time.'[5] Similar to current practices of monitoring vital functions during sport or workout activities, monitoring of the performance of educational systems, schools, and teachers is of strategic importance in the current governing configuration. While *surveillance* includes an evaluation based on a given set of rules or norms and oriented toward increased normalization, *monitoring* attempts to assess the state of performance on a permanent basis in view of continuous learning for innovation. Without going into details, it is important to stress that through these monitoring devices one becomes real and one makes the self-understanding of countries and schools increasingly data-based and even digitalized. An important consequence is the emergence of new concentrations of authority. So far as actors in the field increasingly consult the same reports, graphics, data-sets and examples, the monitoring agencies that produce and spread them become 'centers of calculation,' and the knowledge platforms and databases result in being 'obligatory passage points' when these actors rely on them to come to understand who they are and what their potential future is (Callon, 1986). At the moment that PISA becomes an obligatory passage point for a lot of countries to know their educational system, PISA and, foremost, the OECD become powerful. As a consequence, having control over these obligatory passage points means control over those who are being governed. In this context, it is important to be at least suspicious toward the new data-warehouses, monitoring devices and related forms of information and data management that are being established in many countries. So long as our self-knowledge and self-understanding depends on the data they collect, we make them powerful, and perhaps sovereign, simply through our will to know.

5. Concluding thoughts: '**the world as an educational laboratory**'

The main objective of this article was to understand some of the mechanisms of how we are being governed today, and in what and whose name we are being governed. So-called evidence-based policy includes in practice, and contrary to common understandings, not only just numerical, hard data but also soft, qualitative data. These different forms of knowledge, however, share a similar orientation to what works and, important, also to what works better. This observation offered a point of departure to further analyze the configuration of governing that instead of centralized reform and planning concentrates on local learning and innovation. The current configuration contains no longer a mode of governing that regulates the real and the concrete and that disciplines the possible, but a mode of governing that monitors the possible and designs futures that permanently stimulate learning for increased performance. Hopefully, the study clarified that the current configuration includes several mechanisms that appear as evident but have far-reaching consequences: imposing spaces of meaning and discussion, deciding on what is within one's control and what not, making people believe there is no longer something beyond themselves that is an excuse for actual self-improvement. The message seems to be the following: the future is now and it is all in our hands. And the game of examples is

particularly effective because it reminds us of what is possible, that is, examples show the possible futures that the present holds for us. Monitoring as a consequence allows us to know ourselves, but the produced knowledge is always knowledge about both the actual and the possible selves. It is through assessment that one comes to know oneself today. And perhaps this is no longer the condition of a *modernist*, but of a *globalist* – someone who is no longer struggling with tradition but with context, no longer concerned with reform and planning, but with innovation and learning and, hence, someone who is not in need of a point of *orientation*, but who is lost without permanent *positioning* systems.

As a conclusion, it is important to attempt to grasp what could be considered the ultimate dream of the current governing configuration. The notion of dream is not used in the sense of the ultimate goal that is aimed at somewhere in the future but refers to the 'diagram' of the configuration of governing or what the current configuration imagines to be its purest form (Ewald, 1986). A hint of that diagram can be found in the gradual disappearance of the distinction between the previously closed laboratory setting and the rest of society. Especially in educational affairs, the difference between controlled testing or experimentation sites and the so-called field of practice where tested reforms are applied seems to disappear. Examples of good performance are real practices, but at the same time, experimental practices, for they succeed better than other practices in optimizing performance. The acknowledgment that educational practices, such as schools, may differ in view of their performance implies that these practices could be approached as various experiments with independent variables and certain control variables. Proof for what works (better) is, therefore, no longer just to be found in experimental sites and laboratories of research centers where variables are manipulated, but in society itself. Exactly this way of thinking is clear articulated by Alejandro Tiana:

> We know it is difficult to experiment in education. While in other spheres of human activity experimentation, even when complicated, is feasible, in the field of education it encounters many restrictions. In order to overcome some of these difficulties, almost fifty years ago some pioneering researchers launched the idea of considering the world as an educational laboratory. The central element in this new perspective was to compare the performance of the different education systems, as far as possible controlling the main variables involved. (Tiana, 2002, p. 48)

But the field of education being approached as a laboratory is not merely the result of a kind of epistemological breakthrough. This approach is not possible without transforming the world at once in a controlled setting with monitoring systems in order to be able to collect evidence and find proof on what works (better). Similar to a laboratory setting, increasingly detailed monitoring and increased differentiation and comparison is needed in order to assess performances and find relevant differences. To put this more broadly, governing without reform dreams of a laboratory society that is at once a monitoring society – with monitoring being permanent and total. But equally similar to that laboratory setting, what is needed is control and foremost manipulation of the variables. Manipulation is justified and even necessary when trying to bring about changes in performance levels. Perhaps the term *manipulative* society fits best with the ultimate dream of governing without reform. If that is the case, it is of crucial importance to start looking for the victims of these manipulations: countries, schools, teachers, and specially also the future generation, who all are treated as variables, and with some of them even being treated as control variables that have to be kept constant.

Notes

1. All citations from Dutch and French documents, articles and books are translated by the author.
2. PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) is a worldwide study by the OECD testing 15 year olds' skills and knowledge.
3. For a more detailed discussion of personalization in the field of education, although stressing more specific pedagogical issues, see, for instance, Hartley, 2008.
4. Several issues need further study including the exact relation between current synoptical power and the (re-)introduction of forms of sovereignty, and how 'the power of the example' differs from and relates to new modalities of the exercise of power such as 'the power of feedback': see Simons (2014) for a more detailed elaboration.
5. For the online tool, see: http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/progress_en.htm.

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